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THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS AND ROMAN CHRISTIANITY

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It may be gathered not only from the tone of his admonitions but from at least one specific reference (13 19), that the author of Hebrews was himself associated with the community to which he wrote. His Epistle may therefore be accepted as evidence for the religious position of the readers, as well as of the teacher who addressed them.

The question of destination cannot be regarded by any means as settled, but the weight of critical opinion is more and more in favor of Rome. In this paper I propose to deal more especially with the theological considerations which, to my mind, bear out this hypothesis. The arguments from the literary side are familiar, and it will be enough to recall them with the briefest comment.

From the use of the Epistle by Clement not many years after the probable date of its composition, we know that the Roman church was well acquainted with it, almost from the outset. It is possible, no doubt, that copies of it had found their way to Rome from some Eastern church, but we can hardly assume that it passed so immediately into general circulation. The natural inference from Clement's use of it is certainly that it was the peculiar possession of the Roman church.

The closing salutation, *οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας*, implies that it was written either from or to Italy, in other words Rome; for no mere local community could thus speak for Italian Christians in general. Of the two possible interpretations of the ambiguous phrase, the more reasonable one is clearly that some little Italian colony sends greetings to the home church. This is the more probable as the author of Hebrews does not write, like Clement, in the name of the community, and it would be beyond his province to offer a general salutation. What he appears to do is simply to include the Italian friends who were with him in his greetings to an Italian church. It may be added that the comprehensive term "Italy" has a special fitness if the Epistle was sent to Rome from some distant city, where all Italian Christians would form a single group. The evidence of the salutation is of course compromised by the doubt as to whether the closing chapter is an original part of the Epistle. To my mind the case for the negative has little to stand upon. There is no visible break between any of those concluding verses and what goes before; and the very fact that the writing has no epistolary beginning is strong proof that the ending is genuine. A late editor, anxious to assimilate Hebrews to the Pauline Epistles, would not be likely to leave his work half done.

The circumstances of the church addressed, so far as we can gather them from the various allusions, all point to Rome. It is a church with a long and honorable history. Eminent teachers have labored in it, and have shown a noble example. It has distinguished itself by its liberality and many-sided beneficence. In a peculiar degree it has been exposed to persecution. Here, it is true, we meet with the gravest argument against the Roman destination, for the references to persecution are altogether too mild for a church that had suffered the terrible outrage under Nero. But it must be borne in mind that

the Epistle is addressed to the existing community, which had never been called on to endure a heroic test. Possibly there is a reminiscence of the Neronian persecution in the eulogy of bygone teachers—*ὧν ἀναθεωροῦντες τὴν ἐκβασιν τῆς ἀναστροφῆς, μιμῆσθε τὴν πίστιν* (13 7).

It has often been pointed out that the Epistle contemplates a body of readers who were all living under the same peculiar conditions, and that it cannot therefore have been addressed to the great miscellaneous community at Rome. The argument is perfectly valid; but rightly considered, it furnishes one of the most convincing proofs of the Roman destination. The writer has in view a church within the church — a select company to whom he can address warnings and instructions of a very definite kind. An audience of this nature presupposes one of the large centres of the Christian mission, and we should look for it most naturally in Rome.

Here, however, we touch on a point which seems to me vital for the understanding of the Epistle, and which has been too generally overlooked. Not only is it clear that the writer addresses himself to a separate group within a larger community, but indications are given as to the character of this group. It consisted of mature converts — men who ought themselves to be teachers, and for whom the common instruction in the elements of the doctrine of Christ has ceased to be necessary. The church has a right to expect that they should make paths for the more ignorant to walk in (12 12), and that they should take a certain oversight of their brethren (12 14). It is significant that in his warnings to them the writer says practically nothing of the grosser sins, against which the hortatory sections of other Epistles are mainly directed. They are supposed to have outgrown those pagan immoralities and to be facing subtler temptations — apathy, self-complacency, carelessness about their progress in faith and knowledge.

It may be gathered, therefore, that Hebrews is addressed to a limited circle, called to the study of Christian truth in its higher aspects. That the *τέλειοι* formed a class apart we know from Paul's explicit statement in 1 Cor. 2; and the same fact can be inferred, with hardly less certainty, from the practice which Mark attributes to Jesus of imparting the "mystery of the Kingdom" to the inner circle of his disciples. It is quite unnecessary to conclude that in the church there was a distinction between initiates and ordinary members, as in the pagan cults. We can well understand how the division might have come about of its own accord, as a matter of practical convenience. For purposes of instruction the raw converts, to whom Christian doctrine and morality were utterly strange, would need to be taken separately from those who were more naturally gifted and had advanced to a further stage. We may assume that every community of any importance had its little circle of *τέλειοι*, to whom a teacher could speak freely on the higher matters of Christian knowledge. In a city like Rome, they may have formed a considerable group, meeting separately for religious study, under the guidance of some revered leader. I would suggest that in Hebrews we have a discourse prepared by this master for his disciples at a time when he was parted from them for a considerable period. It is not so much a letter as an address or lecture to be delivered in his name, but he takes the opportunity of adding a few personal notes and greetings at the close.

If the Epistle is thus intended for an inner group of advanced converts, a light is thrown on its real character. It aims at the deeper interpretation of the ordinary beliefs; in other words it is an example of the Gnosis which was cultivated in the primitive church. Just as Paul had a wisdom which he spoke among the *τέλειοι*, so this teacher communicates a doctrine which goes far beyond the usual instruction. He is aware that his readers will find it novel

and difficult, and doubts whether they are yet prepared for these high speculations. He approaches his main theme by careful degrees, and makes a solemn pause before he at last divulges it. In its content, as well as in the manner of its introduction, the doctrine bears all the marks of Gnosis. It is admittedly concerned with the higher world which lies beyond our senses (cf. 2 5). It takes its departure from a cryptic utterance of Scripture. The writer is conscious that he owes his insight to a special illumination, and that he can only proceed "if God permit." His teaching certainly contains nothing that is Gnostic in the later sinister sense. It does not blend Christian ideas with pagan theosophy, and makes no claim to be occult or esoteric, except in so far as it appeals only to mature, enlightened minds. But we must remember that there was a Christian Gnosis, which was not the least valued of the gifts of the Spirit. A great teacher was expected not merely to impart the accepted tradition but to throw light on its further implications, confirming faith by knowledge. Almost from the beginning this speculative activity seems to have gone hand in hand with the transmission of what had been received.

If the Epistle is to be viewed as primarily an example of Gnosis, it stands on a different footing from other early writings, and any account of its teaching must be subject to certain reservations. For one thing, we need not try to extract from it a complete system of theology. The writer's aim is to discuss one peculiar doctrine — a doctrine to which he no doubt attaches the highest importance, but which does not by any means exhaust his whole presentation of the gospel. Again, his Gnosis by its very nature is supplementary to the normal beliefs of the church. It is intended for those who desire "to press on to perfection," to explore the ultimate significance of the work of Christ. But it presupposes the whole body of belief which they already hold in common with their

Christian brethren, and which in itself is sufficient for salvation. Once more, the doctrine in question is not to be taken as in any sense representative. Attempts have often been made to construe the Epistle as the manifesto of some school or party which rested its Christianity on a belief in the priesthood of Christ. It is true that suggestions of this belief can be discovered elsewhere, but there is no indication that it was widely current, much less that any definite type of doctrine had grown out of it. The writer advances it as his own Gnosis, his new and peculiar interpretation of the work of Christ.

The more we examine the Epistle the more we realize how much is *assumed* in it, and how closely its specific teaching is bound up with those underlying assumptions. For all his boldness in speculation the writer is not an original mind in the same sense as Paul or the Fourth Evangelist. He makes no effort to grasp the Christian message as a whole, and think it over again in terms adequate to a new and profound experience. He is content to stand on the common Christian ground, and to work out the hidden implications of ideas that must be taken for granted. The significance of the Epistle resides no less in all that it presupposes than in the new doctrine which it contributes.

It has been necessary to discuss at some length the nature of the Epistle before considering its relation to Roman Christianity. That it was written to Rome by an accredited teacher of the Roman church may fairly be surmised on the ground of the literary evidence; but the peculiarities of its doctrine seem foreign, at first sight, to anything that we know of Roman thought. The difficulty, however, largely disappears when we make allowance for its specific character as a Gnosis, not a mere popular homily. When we come to examine it with this proviso, we find a number of features in its teaching which seem to have their true explanation in its Roman origin.

In the first place, it reflects a mode of thinking which diverges widely from that of Paul. Every one would now admit that the characteristic Pauline doctrines are absent, that Pauline terms are used in a totally different sense, that the interpretation of the work of Christ has hardly a point in common with Paulinism. But the tradition that this document is somehow connected with Paul is dying hard. In most handbooks of New Testament theology it is still classed vaguely as deutero-Pauline, even when the marks that differentiate it from Paul's writings are set in the clearest relief. It seems to me that the first thing necessary to any intelligent study of the Epistle is to rid our minds entirely of this Pauline obsession. A certain affinity with Paul no doubt exists, but it concerns only the larger assumptions with which the writer works. He accepts the usual apocalyptic scheme; he thinks of Christ as a divine or angelic being and lays a central emphasis on his death; he brings Christian ideas into line with contemporary speculation. But from all this it is futile to argue his dependence on Paul. We can only infer that he too was affected, on the one hand, by the primitive Christian and, on the other, by the Hellenistic tradition. The significant fact is not that the two thinkers have a few broad conceptions in common, but that they throw them into different combinations, each of them unconscious that another construction is possible. On the hypothesis that Hebrews is a product of Roman Christianity, this divergence from Paulinism is capable of an obvious explanation. The Roman church had come into being and grown to maturity apart from the Pauline influence. It had been faced with Paul's problem of adapting the gospel to Gentile conditions and needs, but had solved it in a fashion of its own, and its type of teaching had become more or less fixed before Paul's conclusions could affect it. There may have been other centres of Gentile Christianity outside of the Pauline orbit, but one at least is

known to us; and if the theology of Hebrews is roughly parallel to Paulinism but quite distinct, we have a strong presumption that it arose in the great independent church of Rome.

In Hebrews no trace can be discovered of anything that can properly be called mysticism. There is no suggestion of a union with Christ, or of a new life imparted by him to the believer. The Holy Spirit is viewed simply as the power behind the charismata, or as the source of scriptural revelation. The idea of participation in the divine nature gives way to that of access to God by means of a perfected form of worship. As the Epistle excludes the mystical element generally, so it allows no place to sacramental doctrine. The Eucharist is never even mentioned. To baptism there are several passing allusions, from which we can gather that it marks the formal transition to the Christian life. But it does not appear to be construed mystically, as the act of the new birth, or as the dying and rising with Christ. Its significance is at most that which was assigned to it in the primitive church — a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. As in the early chapters of Acts, it is coupled with the Old Testament ordinance of the laying on of hands. How are we to account for this falling away of the mystical strain, which is elsewhere dominant in Hellenistic Christianity? Its exclusion from Hebrews is all the more remarkable when we bear in mind the relation of the Epistle to Philonic thought, which is essentially mystical. The fact may be explained partly from the writer's temperament, which responded to the Hellenistic influence on its reflective rather than on its mystical side. It may be explained also from his fidelity, in spite of Alexandrian sympathies, to the Hebraic and primitive Christian tradition. But if we may assume that he represents a Roman type of Christianity, there is yet a further explanation, for as far back as we can go the Roman church has shown itself averse to all forms of mysticism. The

Epistle of Clement takes no account whatever of those aspects of religion which were vital to Paul and the Fourth Evangelist. The *Shepherd of Hermas* may be partially modeled on the *Poimandres*, but in place of mystical speculation it offers imagery, symbolism, allegory. From the beginning the Roman church was preoccupied with moral and ecclesiastical interests, and the conception of Christianity as a new life, an inward fellowship with God, fell wholly into the background. In this connection it may be worth remarking that in Hebrews there seems to be nothing which can be related to the Oriental cults, if we except a few doubtful words (*κύριος*, *μεσίτης*, *φωτισμός*) belonging to the general religious vocabulary of the time. A similar aloofness from the Oriental ideas is observable in 1 Clement. One is tempted to the inference that in Rome the church assimilated itself to the mystery religions to a far less degree than in Asia Minor. Owing perhaps to a preponderance of the Jewish element, or perhaps to an innate shrinking from mysticism, it took the direction of a reformed Judaism rather than of a Hellenistic theosophy.

The writer of Hebrews conceives of Christianity as a *ὁμολογία*, which it is the duty of the believer to hold fast in spite of all temptations to drift away. This identification of the new faith with a given body of beliefs and practices, which must be accepted once for all, was no doubt a feature of Catholic Christianity in general. But it was congenial in a special degree to the Roman type of mind, and the Roman church seems to have been chiefly instrumental in fixing it. Loyalty to the confession is coupled in the Epistle — and here we can discern another Roman trait — with reverence for the past, for the ancient institutions of Israel and the bygone teachers of the church. From one point of view the writing is nothing but a prolonged plea to live worthily of the past, upholding its traditions and carrying them out to yet higher issues.

Christianity is presented not as a new revelation but as the perfecting of all that was true and significant in the history of the past. More than any other New Testament writer the author of Hebrews stands for the principle of authority; and this, it must be acknowledged, is the theological weakness of the Epistle. For Paul the fundamental truths are the real and vital ones, and he is ever striving to understand them better and grasp them more certainly. For this writer they are so much to be taken for granted, "the rudiments of the doctrine of Christ," from which we must pass on, in the quest for a higher knowledge. In a sense he might be called the first of the scholastics. He sets himself to elaborate a soaring theory on no other ultimate basis than that of authority, the authority of Scripture and of the received "confession." In this feature of the Epistle we may discern not merely the mark of Catholic Christianity, but the individual signature of Rome.

It is not a little remarkable that the polemical motive plays hardly any part in the Epistle. The one reference to "strange teachings" (13 9) is of an incidental nature, and concerns some ascetic tendency which does not seem to have affected any cardinal Christian belief. In other New Testament writings of approximately the same date heresy is already the burning question, but the writer in Hebrews is content to leave it wholly on one side. This may partly be accounted for on the supposition that the Epistle is addressed to a select group of mature converts, in little danger of falling into the extravagances of semi-pagan speculation. But if heresy had begun to be a serious peril to the community at large, some polemic against it could hardly have been avoided. There is fair ground for concluding that the Epistle contemplates a church which as yet had been little troubled by false teaching, and Rome best answers to this condition. All the evidence goes to prove that the effort to drag Christianity into the syncre-

tistic movement began in the East, and did not manifest itself at Rome until a later date. Ignatius does not speak the language of mere compliment when he acknowledges the Roman church to be "filtered clear from every foreign stain." Indeed there are numerous indications that Rome, even when it became the centre of the great Gnostic teachers, did not afford the most congenial soil for their propaganda. It is noticeable that the one reference to false doctrine in our Epistle touches on the same form of error with which Paul deals — in order to condone it — in the fourteenth chapter of Romans. This coincidence must not be pressed, for an interval of about a generation lies between the two Epistles, not to speak of the cataclysm under Nero. At the same time it is not impossible that the ascetic tendency of which Paul is aware had persisted in the Roman church, and had grown to be something of a danger to higher religious interests.

Our Epistle has nothing whatever to say of the cleavage between Jew and Gentile. The old idea that the writer addresses himself to a purely Jewish audience and therefore ignores the alien section of the church, may now, I imagine, be safely discarded. No result of modern criticism seems more assured than that the title, "to the Hebrews," is a misnomer. For the writer the fusion of Jew and Gentile in the new Israel has become so complete that he can transfer to the church, without further question, the prerogatives of God's ancient people. He assumes that the new covenant links itself on to the old and perfects it; that believers, of whatever race they spring, are the sons and heirs of Abraham. This disappearance of the old division is perhaps an evidence of the date of the Epistle more than of its place of origin; but there is reason to believe that at Rome earlier than elsewhere Jews and Gentiles were finally united in one common church. In 1 Clement as in Hebrews the distinction between them is never drawn, and Jewish institutions and ordinances are freely

appealed to as normative for the church. It is easily conceivable that in the larger atmosphere of Rome the early dissensions had rapidly died down, and that the pressure of common danger had also done its part in bringing the two parties in the church together. Moreover, the development of the church as an institution would inevitably work for fusion. At Rome the demand for order and uniformity was always paramount, and ancient lines of division had little chance of maintaining themselves.

Perhaps it is only a matter of accident that the classical passage on the impossibility of repentance after baptism is found in Hebrews (6 4 ff. Cf. also 12 17). The view expressed in the passage was the logical consequence of primitive ideas regarding baptism, and was held, we can scarcely doubt, by Christian teachers generally. None the less, it is the writer of Hebrews who insists on it in emphatic language. Not once only, but on two separate occasions he goes out of his way to declare that repentance after baptism is impossible. One can hardly avoid the impression that between the view so strongly maintained in the Epistle and the polemic in the *Shepherd of Hermas* there is some direct relation. It seems not too bold to conjecture that in the church of Rome the question of post-baptismal repentance had early come to the forefront, and had been discussed with peculiar warmth. The laxer position with which Rome identified itself in the following century may already have found its advocates, and the writer of Hebrews may have felt it necessary to combat it. In this case we should have to reckon him in that succession of conservative leaders who vainly attempted for several centuries to resist the Roman tendency to soften the ancient discipline.

These points of contact with Roman Christianity all belong, as might have been expected, to those larger assumptions which underlie the special thesis of the Epistle. If the doctrine of the heavenly priesthood of Christ is an

example of Gnosis, we may regard it as more or less peculiar to the writer himself. Traces of it may be discovered elsewhere, in early Christian as well as in Jewish apocalyptic literature, and it is more than probable that he avails himself of a conception that was already current. But there is every reason to believe that he was the first who thought of elaborating it into a central Christian doctrine. Not only does he speak of it himself as something new and hard to be understood, but all later versions of it are obviously derived from him, and from him alone. Granting, however, that he works out a speculation of his own, we can well conceive how it might have been suggested to him by Roman influences. In Rome ceremonial aspects of religion were always emphasized. Christianity was not so much a mode of inner communion with God as a purer form of worship, and the whole question of ritual was under constant discussion. Clement, in a passage already referred to, appeals to the priestly ordinances of the Old Testament as still in some measure valid, and as providing a model for the church. Now it is true that the writer of Hebrews has little interest in ecclesiastical order and ceremony. His doctrine of the priesthood of Christ, pushed to its logical conclusion, would make all the external forms of Christian as well as Jewish worship superfluous. Yet it is not difficult to understand how a contemplative mind might be led to this doctrine in a church that was accustomed to think of religion in the terms of ritual. Just as the Fourth Evangelist in the mystical atmosphere of Ephesus conceived of Christianity as an inward divine life, so this Roman thinker would define it to himself as a worship, an approach to God through the ministry of the great High Priest.

The Epistle, whatever may have been its origin, is marked by a curious affinity at once to the earliest and to the latest phases of New Testament thought. On the one hand, it adopts the Alexandrian categories and rests on

the assumptions of Catholic Christianity. Were it not for the definite evidences of its early date we might be disposed to class it with the Apologies of the following century rather than with the writings of the Apostolic age. On the other hand, it is reminiscent of the primitive tradition. In its naïve acceptance of the apocalyptic scheme, its view of Christianity as a perfected Judaism, its interest in the historical Jesus, its rejection of mystical and sacramental ideas, it seems to reflect the attitude of the church in Jerusalem. The two opposite types of thought are never really reconciled. They are interwoven, often with remarkable skill, but the primitive strain can be clearly distinguished from the later one with which it is combined. May we not discover the true explanation of this dual character of the Epistle in the conditions under which Christianity had developed at Rome? It had been introduced, apparently in the very earliest years of the church, by unknown missionaries, who had taught the gospel as it was understood by the mother community. In the church which they founded the original tradition held its own, and was never reinterpreted on Hellenistic lines, as in the Pauline churches. None the less, in a Gentile environment it was bound to come to terms with the Gentile ideas. The primitive type of thought persisted, but was overlaid by a theology with which it had no inner connection. Instead of the fusion which was effected elsewhere by the genius of Paul, there was a process of stratification.

Apart, however, from all debatable questions, there are solid grounds for believing that the Epistle to the Hebrews is our earliest monument of Roman Christianity, and a closer investigation of it from this point of view is much to be desired. No writing in the New Testament has been more unfortunate in its interpreters. Under the influence of false or one-sided theories it has been handed over to specialists in Jewish ritual or Alexandrian philosophy; it

has been treated as the outcome of some obscure side-current in Christian thought, which was destined to lose itself among the sands. A more adequate criticism may come in time to recognize it as a historical document of the first importance, throwing light on the genesis of that type of Christianity which, through the premier church, was at last to win predominance.